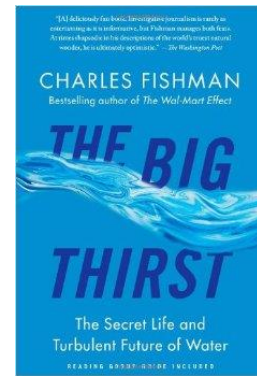


The Big Thirst

The Secret Life and Turbulent Future of Water

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Excerpts from “*The Big Thirst*” by Charles Fishman

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“The pricing of water has a kind of invisibility—or opacity, at least—all its own. Ten gallons of tap water, at home, costs on average 3 pennies. That’s the equivalent of getting seventy-four of those \$1.29 half-liter bottles of water we love so much for less than a nickel. We happily pay three thousand times that price at the convenience store—one bottle for \$1.29. But when the water bill goes from \$30 to \$34 a month, customers react as if they’ll have to choose between their prescription drugs and their water service. We gladly pay perfectly silly prices for productized water because of the aura that’s been created around it. But we have so little appreciation of the effort required to get water into our homes that any price increase inspires outrage.”

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“Of course, even the 1.1 billion people without access to clean, safe water do drink water every day—everyone on earth finds water every day. They have no choice. Those 1.1 billion people use about 5 liters a day each. In the United States, on average, each one of us uses 70 liters (18.5 gallons) just to flush our toilets. And to just goose the stunning contrast between water wealth and water poverty one more notch, the 1.1 billion people who subsist on 5 liters of water a day are drinking water we wouldn’t wash our dishes in; whereas we are peeing into pristine drinking water, and flushing it away. (In fact, just a single flush of a low-flush toilet in the United States—1.6 gallons—uses 6 liters of drinking water.”

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“Perhaps the most unsettling attitude we’ve begun to develop about water is a kind of disdain for the era we’ve just lived through. The very universal access that has been the core of our water philosophy for the last hundred years—that provision of clean, dependable tap water that created the golden age of water—that very principle has turned on its head. **The brilliant invisibility of our water system has become its most significant vulnerability. That invisibility makes it difficult for people to understand the effort and money required to sustain a system that has been in place for decades, but has in fact been quietly corroding from decades of neglect.** Why should I pay higher taxes just to replace some old water pipes? I’ll just drink bottled water if I don’t like what comes out of the tap. It is almost as if tap water is regarded not with respect and appreciation but with a hint of condescension, even contempt.

“Of course, you can’t call Dasani if your house catches on fire. We are in danger of allowing ourselves to imagine that since we’ve got FedEx, we don’t also need the postal service. When universal, twenty-four-hour-a-day access to water starts to slip away, it becomes very hard to bring back. But sustaining it requires more than paying the monthly water bill.

“If we’re going to be ready for a new era of water, we need to reclaim water from our superficial sense of it, we need to reclaim it from the clichés. We need to rediscover its true value, and also the serious commitment required to provide it. It is one of the ironies of our relationship to water that moment it becomes unavailable, the moment it really disappears—that’s when water becomes most urgently visible.”

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“Our relationship to water goes way beyond what we know about it. The facts about water, the science, the chemistry, the geology—those are both fascinating and important. There would be no advanced civilization today without that understanding—we would have long since poisoned ourselves.

“But our relationship to water is at least as much emotional as it is analytical. That’s why a bottle of Evian tastes so good that we pay a thousand times more for it than for the same amount of water from the kitchen

faucet. It's the reason that water pipes hidden beneath our streets are poorly maintained, it's why people around the world get so angry when their water bills go up."

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(Excerpt quoted by the author from a ruling by District Court Judge Paul Magnuson, who declared that most of Atlanta's withdrawals from Lake Lanier, going back 30 years, had in fact been unauthorized and illegal. His decision immediately cut the amount of water the city was used to getting to 66 gal of water per person per day for all purposes, less than half of what they used during the driest period of the drought. He said in his ruling:)

"Too often, state, local and even national government actors do not consider the long-term consequences of their decisions. Local governments allow unchecked growth because it increases tax revenue, but these same governments do not sufficiently plan for the resources such unchecked growth will require. Nor do individual citizens consider frequently enough their consumption of our scarce resources, absent a crisis such as that experienced in the [Apalachicola-Chattahoochee] basin will continue to be repeated throughout this country, as the population grows and more undeveloped land is developed. **Only by cooperating, planning and conserving can we avoid the situations that gave rise to this litigation."**

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"Almost every community in the United States has water problems. The good news is, water problems can be solved, and the sooner we start thinking about them, the less expensive those solutions are. The bad news is, water problems can't be solved quickly, and when there's a water crisis, the quick solutions are expensive. Water requires thinking about the future not in sunny, optimistic terms but in frankly realistic terms."

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"In the twenty-one years Mulroy has been water chief, use of water in Las Vegas has dropped by 108 gallons per day—Las Vegas aren't using 216 million gallons of water a day they would be without the dramatic conservation regime that has taken hold since 1989. As it happens, that's almost the total amount of water the city was using in 1989--Las Vegas today save almost as much water as they used when Mulroy [the water commissioner] got her water job. But those kinds of water-use habits change very, very slowly. In any given year, per capita water use in Las Vegas only fell four or five gallons. **You can't save a hundred gallons of water per person per day with posters and TV commercials urging people to take shorter showers and skip a car wash. You save that much water by thinking twenty years ahead and imagining what it would take to change how a whole community operates, how it thinks about itself--and by giving people time to think differently about themselves, their community, and their water."**

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"What we take for granted isn't the water itself, of course, so much as the work, and the money, necessary to provide instant, safe water. It takes at least \$29 billion a year in the United States just to keep up with the deteriorating water pipes and aging water treatment plants. The typical American family spends about \$34 a month on its water utility bill--\$408 a year. But the water system--the pipes, pumps and treatment tanks--needs \$260 per family, per year, in capital spending just to prevent things from corroding and aging into uselessness."